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THE SALE OF WATER BY CHILDREN IN URBAN AREAS OF KISANGANI: CAUSES AND REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the phenomenon of water sales by children in the urban area of Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo. Despite the country's abundant water resources, access to drinking water remains a major challenge in this city with a rapidly growing population. Faced with the failure of public infrastructure and endemic poverty, many families resort to child labour to meet their basic needs. Through a sociological approach rooted in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social capital and Serge Paugam's theories of social exclusion, this study analyzes the root causes and daily realities of these child water sellers. The results show that this phenomenon is not only a consequence of economic precariousness, but also a reflection of a structural failure of the state in the provision of basic services. The article proposes a critical reflection on the implications of this early work on the physical, psychological and educational development of children, while highlighting the urgency of integrated public policies.

KEYWORDS: Child labour, water sales, poverty, social exclusion, social capital.

INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is home to more than half of the surface water reserves on the African continent¹. Yet, paradoxically, access to drinking water remains a luxury for a large majority of its population. In the city of Kisangani, the capital of the province of Tshopo and the fifth most populous city in the country, this contradiction is particularly acute. Crossed by the majestic Congo River and bordered by the Wagenia Falls, the city nevertheless suffers from a chronic shortage of drinking water in households².

Faced with this infrastructural deficiency and widespread poverty, coping strategies are being developed within families. One of the most visible and worrying manifestations of these strategies is the involvement of children in the informal sector, particularly in the street sale of water. Every day, dozens of children travel the arteries of Kisangani, carrying heavy loads of water to sell it to passers-by or to households not served by the public network of the REGIDESO (Régie de Distribution d'Eau)³.

Child labour is a flagrant violation of their fundamental rights, as stipulated by the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the DRC⁴. It compromises their education, harms their health and hinders their overall development. However, in the socio-economic context of Kisangani, this phenomenon persists and even seems to be increasing, supported by a complex dynamic in which economic necessity, state failure and social tolerance are intertwined.

This scientific reflection analyzes in depth the causes and realities of the sale of water by children in Kisangani. The aim is to go beyond the simple observation to understand the sociological mechanisms underlying this practice, by examining the interactions between household poverty, limited access to basic services and the life trajectories of these young economic actors.

1 Global Press Journal. (2023), DRC Has Vast Water Resources, But Kisangani's Taps Run Dry. Récupéré de <https://globalpressjournal.com/africa/democratic-republic-of-congo/drc-vast-water-resources-kisanganis-taps-run-dry/index.html>

2 World Bank. (2019), Reports on Water and Infrastructure in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.

3 Ditto

4 UNICEF. (1989), International Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of child labour has been the subject of numerous studies at the global, regional and national levels. According to joint estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF, there are about 138 million children in child labour worldwide, nearly two-thirds of whom (about 87 million) are in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵

Previous research agrees that poverty is the root cause of child labour. Diallo (2008), in his analysis of children's activities in sub-Saharan Africa, emphasizes that insufficient parental income forces families to mobilize their offspring's labour force as a survival strategy⁶. This perspective is reinforced by the work of Plan International, which also identifies the lack of birth certificates, difficult access to schooling and humanitarian crises as aggravating factors⁷.

However, the specific literature on the sale of water by children in Congolese urban areas remains fragmentary. World Bank and USAID reports highlight the dilapidated water infrastructure in the DRC, most of which dates back to the colonial era, and the low rate of public investment in this sector⁸. In Kisangani, local surveys reveal that more than half of households depend on untreated water sources, exposing the population to major health risks such as typhoid fever and cholera⁹.

The originality of our study lies in the convergence of these two issues: the urban water crisis and the economic exploitation of children. By focusing on Kisangani, we seek to fill an empirical and theoretical gap on how a specific infrastructural failure generates a particular form of child labour.

5 Plan International. (2026)., Causes and consequences of child labour around the world. Retrieved from <https://www.plan-international.fr/nos-combats/protection/causes-et-consequences-du-travail-des-enfants-dans-le-world/>

6 Diallo, Y. (2008)., Children's Activities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons from Child Labour Surveys in West Africa. International Labour Organization (ILO) / UCW

7 Plan International, op. cit.

8 World Bank, op. cit.

9 Idem

2. PROBLEM

The city of Kisangani is experiencing rapid population growth. Between 2000 and 2022, its population increased 2.3 times, from 586,000 to more than 1.3 million inhabitants¹⁰. This rapid urbanization has not been accompanied by a proportional development of basic infrastructure, in particular the drinking water distribution network. REGIDESO, faced with obsolete equipment dating from 1939 and a lack of funding, struggled to serve the entire population¹¹.

In this context of scarcity, water is becoming a scarce and monetizable commodity. Poor families, hit by unemployment and precariousness, find in the sale of water an opportunity to generate immediate income. Children, considered a docile and inexpensive workforce, are then propelled into the informal market.

This situation raises several fundamental questions:

1. What are the socio-economic root causes that push families in Kisangani to involve their children in the sale of water?
2. What are the real working conditions of these children and how does this activity impact their health, education and psychological development?
3. How does the state's failure to provide equitable access to clean water contribute to the reproduction of poverty and social exclusion through child labour?
4. Assumptions

To answer these questions, we formulate the following hypotheses:

1. The sale of water by children in Kisangani is a direct result of the intersection between extreme household poverty and the structural failure of public water services.

¹⁰ World Population Review. (2026)., Kisangani Population 2026. Retrieved global demographic data.

¹¹ World Bank, op.cit.

2. Children who sell water suffer adverse consequences on their schooling (absenteeism, dropout) and their health (water-borne diseases, physical exhaustion), thus compromising their future human capital.
3. The lack of social and economic capital of marginalized families traps them in a cycle of disqualifying poverty, where child labor appears to be the only alternative for survival, thus reproducing social inequalities from one generation to the next.

4. OBJECTIVES AND INTERESTS OF THE STUDY

4.1. General and specific objectives

In general, the study aims to analyze the socio-economic causes and daily realities of the sale of water by children in the city of Kisangani, in order to understand the dynamics of this phenomenon and its implications on the development of the child.

At the specific level, the study aims to identify and describe the determining factors (economic, social, institutional) that promote the emergence and maintenance of water sales by children in Kisangani; to evaluate the working conditions of these children (schedules, income, risks incurred) and their impact on schooling and health; to analyze the perceptions of parents, children and the community in the face of this practice in the end to propose avenues for reflection for the development of public policies aimed at eradicating this phenomenon and improving access to drinking water.

4.2. Interests of the study

1. At the scientific level: It contributes to the enrichment of urban sociology and the sociology of childhood in the DRC, by providing recent empirical data on a little-documented problem in Kisangani. It tests the relevance of theories of social reproduction in a context of infrastructural crisis.
2. On the social level: It highlights the precarious living conditions of a vulnerable fringe of the population, giving a voice to these children who are often invisible in official statistics. It challenges the collective conscience on the need to protect children.
3. Policy and practice: The results of this study are a decision-making tool for local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and development actors. They provide an evidence-based basis for designing

Targeted interventions, both in the field of improving water supply and in the fight against child labour.

5. Theoretical and methodological framework

5.1. Theoretical framework

To understand the complexity of our object of study, we mobilize two complementary theoretical approaches, namely the theory of social capital and social reproduction (Pierre Bourdieu) and the paradigm of social disqualification (Serge Paugam).

1. The theory of social capital and social reproduction (Pierre Bourdieu). According to Bourdieu, the position of an individual in the social space is determined by the volume and structure of his or her capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic)¹². The families of children who sell water in Kisangani are characterized by a deep deficit of this capital. Without economic capital (stable income) and cultural capital (high level of education), they cannot pass on to their children the resources they need to succeed academically. The use of child labour then becomes a mechanism for reproducing inequalities, where children inherit their parents' dominated position.

2. The paradigm of social disqualification (Serge Paugam). Paugam analyzes poverty not as a static state, but as a process of breaking social ties¹³. Families forced to send their children to sell water often find themselves in a phase of marginal or disqualifying poverty. The inability to provide for basic needs without the help of their children leads to stigma and loss of social status. Child labour is both a consequence of this exclusion and a factor that aggravates it, by distancing it from inclusive institutions such as schools.

5.2. Methodological framework

Our approach is part of a mixed approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to grasp reality in all its dimensions.

¹² Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York, Greenwood.

¹³ Paugam, S. (1991). *Social disqualification. Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France (PUF), pp.24.

1. Data collection method

- Documentary research: Critical analysis of institutional reports (World Bank, UNICEF, ILO), scientific articles and local press articles concerning access to water and child labour in Kisangani.
- Semi-structured interviews: Conducting interviews with a targeted sample including children who sell water (to understand their experiences), parents (to understand economic motivations), and local officials (REGIDESO, social services).
- Participant observation: Immersion in peripheral neighborhoods and water outlets (markets, crossroads) to observe interactions, working conditions and informal distribution flows.

2. Sampling

The study focuses on the communes most affected by water scarcity in Kisangani, including the commune of Mangobo and the outlying districts. The sample is constituted in a reasoned manner to ensure the representativeness of the different situations (children in school working part-time 40, out-of-school children working full-time 80), 50 parents and 15 institutional and community actors are surveyed.

3. Data analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews are subjected to a thematic content analysis, making it possible to identify recurrences and divergences in the discourses. Quantitative data (income, working hours, age) are statistically processed to establish standard profiles.

1. The socio-economic and infrastructural context of Kisangani

1.1. A galloping population in the face of obsolete infrastructure

The city of Kisangani, located in the heart of the rainforest, is a prime example of the challenges of rapid urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa. With an estimated population of more than 1.6 million in 2026, the city has grown exponentially, multiplying its population by 2.3 times since the early 2000¹⁴. This population explosion, fuelled by both natural increase and rural exodus following armed conflicts in the east of the country, has put unsustainable pressure on already fragile urban infrastructure.

¹⁴ World Population Review, Op. cit.

The drinking water sector is one of the hardest hit by this imbalance. REGIDESO, the public company in charge of water distribution, operates with a network of pipes dating largely from 1939, the time of Belgian colonisation¹⁵. These outdated, rust-ridden, chronically unmaintained facilities are unable to meet current demand. Leaks are frequent, leading to massive losses even before the water reaches the taps of subscribers.

In addition, the expansion of the city has been carried out in an anarchic manner, with the appearance of vast unplanned peripheral districts. These areas, often without any connection to the official network, are home to a mostly poor population. Thus, according to World Bank data, only 19% of the Congolese population has access to drinking water in their place of residence¹⁶. In Kisangani, the situation is particularly critical in communes such as Mangobo, where residents can go for days or even weeks without seeing a drop of water flow from their taps.

1.2. The Water Paradox: Natural Abundance and Domestic Scarcity

The situation in Kisangani is all the more tragic as it is part of a context of exceptional natural abundance. The DRC holds more than 50% of Africa's surface water reserves, and the Congo River, which flows through Kisangani, has the second largest flow in the world after the Amazon¹⁷. The Wagenia Falls, located near the city, testify to this hydrological power.

However, this abundance does not translate into access to drinking water for households. This paradox can be explained by a glaring deficit in public investment. Between 2010 and 2015, of the \$280 million invested in REGIDESO's urban sector at the national level, only 1% came from the Congolese government, with the rest provided by international donors.¹⁸ The state's inability to finance the modernization of treatment and distribution infrastructure is turning an abundant natural resource into a scarce and expensive commodity for the ordinary citizen.

¹⁵ World Bank, op. cit.

¹⁶ Idem

¹⁷ Global Press Journal. Op. cit.

¹⁸ World Bank, op. cit.

Faced with this institutionalized shortage, the inhabitants of Kisangani are forced to turn to alternative, often unsanitary, sources. About 53% of households in Tshopo province depend on untreated surface water or undeveloped springs.¹⁹ This situation creates major health risks, with a high prevalence of waterborne diseases such as typhoid fever, cholera and various diarrhoeal diseases, which primarily affect young children.

1.3. Urban poverty as a breeding ground for child labour

The water crisis in Kisangani cannot be understood in isolation from the overall economic context of the city. The once thriving local industrial fabric (textiles, brewing) has collapsed over decades of poor governance and conflict. Today, the city's economy is dominated by the informal sector, which absorbs the vast majority of the working population.

Endemic unemployment and underemployment keep a large proportion of households in a situation of chronic poverty. The income generated by informal activities (petty trade, survival crafts, urban agriculture) is often insufficient to cover the basic needs of the family: food, housing, health and education. It is in this soil of precariousness that child labour is rooted. When parents can no longer make ends meet, the children's labour force becomes an indispensable economic resource. The sale of water, due to the high demand generated by the failures of REGIDESO, appears to be an immediate income opportunity, requiring little start-up capital. Thus, the failure of the state to provide an essential public service directly creates a thriving informal market, in which children become the main actors, to the detriment of their own development.

2. The causes of children's involvement in the sale of water

2.1. Economic necessity and family survival

The first and most obvious cause of children's involvement in water sales in Kisangani is extreme household poverty. As the sociological literature on child labour points out, insufficient parental income is the main driver driving children into the labour market²⁰. In the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Kisangani, the sale of water

¹⁹ World Bank, op. cit.

²⁰ Plan International, op. cit.

is not perceived as an enrichment activity, but as a daily survival strategy.

The income generated by child water sellers, although modest, is often crucial for the family. They are used to buy the day's food, to pay the rent or, paradoxically, to finance the school fees of the child himself or his brothers and sisters. In single-parent families, often headed by women, or in households where the parents are sick or unemployed, the child sometimes becomes the main breadwinner.

This dynamic perfectly illustrates the concept of disqualifying poverty developed by Serge Paugam²¹. Families, unable to support themselves through the traditional channels of the adult labour market, are forced to transgress social norms (which would have the child in school) in order to survive. This transgression is often experienced with a feeling of shame and powerlessness by parents, who are aware that they are sacrificing their children's future to ensure the present.

2.2.The failure of the education system

Difficult access to quality education is another determining factor. Although the DRC has officially decreed free primary education, its implementation on the ground remains uneven and often ineffective. Kisangani's public schools suffer from overcrowding, a lack of adequate infrastructure, and underpaid or unpaid teachers.

In addition, free education does not always cover additional costs (uniforms, school supplies, teacher motivation costs, which are sometimes kept clandestinely). For many poor families, these costs remain prohibitive. Faced with an education system perceived as failing and unable to guarantee social advancement, some parents consider that early learning of an income-generating activity is more useful for the child's future than attending a dilapidated school.

The geographical distance of schools in the new peripheral districts is also an obstacle. Children sometimes have to walk long distances, increasing fatigue and the risk of dropping out of school. Once they have dropped out of school,

²¹ Paugam, S., *Social Disqualification. Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France (PUF), 1991, p.29.

These children are immediately absorbed into the informal sector, with the sale of water being one of the most accessible activities.

2.3. The social and cultural trivialization of child labour

Beyond economic constraints, the involvement of children in the sale of water can also be explained by a certain tolerance, or even a social trivialization of the phenomenon. In many African societies, the participation of the child in the domestic and economic tasks of the family has traditionally been valued as a process of socialization and learning of responsibilities²².

However, in Kisangani, this traditional conception is distorted by the urban context and the logic of the market. What was once a one-off help in the family (fetching water for the house) is turning into a full-time economic operation in the public space. The line between domestic work and child labour is becoming blurred.

This trivialization is reinforced by the daily visibility of the phenomenon. The inhabitants of Kisangani, themselves victims of water scarcity, are getting used to buying their water from these children. The child water seller becomes a familiar figure in the urban landscape, making the violence of his condition invisible. This tacit acceptance by the community weakens social control mechanisms and renders inoperative the laws prohibiting child labour, even though they have been ratified by the Congolese state.

2.4. The absence of social capital and the reproduction of inequalities

By mobilizing Pierre Bourdieu's theory, we can see that the families of children who sell water suffer from an acute deficit of social capital²³. They are isolated, lacking networks of influential connections that could help them find stable employment, obtain credit to start a small formal business, or access social assistance.

This lack of social capital locks them into short-term survival strategies. By sending their children to sell water, these families deprive them of the opportunity to accumulate cultural capital (through education) and social capital (through attendance at inclusive institutions). The child water seller, confined to a network of relationships limited to the informal street sector, has very little chance of extricating himself from his condition.

22 Diallo, Y. (2008).

23 Bourdieu, P. (1986).

Thus, the sale of water by children is not only a consequence of current poverty, it is the mechanism by which this poverty is reproduced for the future generation. Early work acts as a social lock-in, confirming the hypothesis that the absence of capital locks marginalized families into a cycle of reproducing inequality.

3. The daily realities and working conditions of child water sellers

3.1. Work organization and daily itineraries

The daily reality of child water sellers in Kisangani is marked by arduousness and precariousness. These children, whose ages generally vary between 8 and 15 years old, operate according to an informal but well-structured organization. Their day often starts very early, sometimes before sunrise, to get their water from the few functional water points, public standpipes, or directly from natural springs and the river.

Procurement is in itself a test. Children have to queue for hours, sometimes in a climate of tension and jostling with adults. Once the containers are filled (usually 10 to 20 litre plastic canisters), the long journey of distribution begins. The children walk for miles, carrying heavy loads on their heads, on their backs, or with the help of makeshift rickshaws.

Their routes cover markets, bus stations, construction sites and residential areas not served by REGIDESO. They sell water by the cup for thirsty passers-by, or by the jerry can for households. Working hours are extendable and depend on demand, water availability and the income goal set by parents or guardians. Some children work full-time, having dropped out of school altogether, while others try to reconcile school in the morning with selling water in the afternoon, at the cost of extreme exhaustion.

3.2. Health and physical risks

The working conditions of these children expose them to multiple health and physical risks. Repeated carrying of heavy loads, unsuitable for their growing morphology, leads to spinal deformities, chronic joint pain and growth retardation. Physical exhaustion is a constant, decreasing their immune resistance.

In addition, these children are in constant contact with water whose quality is often questionable. By drawing water from undeveloped springs or from the river, they are directly exposed to waterborne diseases (cholera, typhoid, intestinal parasitosis). The lack of hygiene when handling containers and cups also promotes the transmission of these diseases to their customers, making these children, in spite of themselves, vectors of public health problems.

The urban environment itself is a threat. Child water sellers live on the street, exposed to bad weather (oppressive heat, torrential rains), car pollution and the risk of traffic accidents. The street is a vulnerable space where they are often left to their own devices, without adequate protection.

3.3. Exposure to violence and exploitation

The street also exposes these children to various forms of violence and exploitation. They are frequently victims of harassment, extortion and physical violence by adults, unscrupulous clients or gangs of juvenile delinquents (commonly known as kulunas in the DRC). Girl water vendors are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Economic exploitation is inherent in their activity. The income generated is derisory compared to the effort made. Children generally do not control the money they earn; they must give it in full to their parents or to intermediaries who employ them. In some cases, informal networks exploit these children, renting them cans or rickshaws at exorbitant prices, keeping them in a situation of quasi-servile dependence.

This daily violence and exploitation leaves deep psychological scars. Children often develop a sense of worthlessness, injustice and distrust of adults. The lack of time for play and leisure, which are essential for their mental balance, hinders their emotional and social development.

4. Consequences and prospects for intervention

4.1. Impact on education and human capital development

The most dramatic consequence of the sale of water by children is the compromise of their education. For children trying to balance work and school, accumulated fatigue translates into chronic absenteeism, frequent tardiness and a decline in drastic increase in school performance. The child, exhausted by his day's work, has neither the time nor the energy to study or do his homework.

For the majority of them, the sale of water inevitably leads to early school dropout. By dropping out of school, these children miss out on the opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to access decent jobs as adults. They are condemned to reproduce the poverty pattern of their parents, confined to the informal sector and precarious jobs.

On a macro-economic scale, this phenomenon represents an invaluable loss of human capital for the city of Kisangani and for the DRC as a whole. The economic and social development of a nation is based on the education of its youth. By sacrificing the education of these children on the altar of immediate survival, society mortgages its own future.

4.2. The urgency of an integrated institutional response

Faced with the scale and complexity of the phenomenon, ad hoc or purely repressive interventions are doomed to failure. Simply prohibiting children from selling water without providing economic alternatives to their families would only worsen their precariousness or push them into even more dangerous and clandestine activities.

An effective response requires an integrated approach, simultaneously addressing the root causes (poverty and the water crisis) and the consequences (out-of-school and children's vulnerability).

1. Rehabilitation of water infrastructure

The top priority is to resolve the water crisis in Kisangani. The Congolese State, with the support of its international partners, must invest massively in the modernization and extension of the REGIDESO network. Improving the supply of drinking water in the outlying districts would drastically reduce the demand for water sold informally, thus drying up the market that exploits these children.

2. Economic support for vulnerable families

To break the cycle of poverty, social safety nets and income-generating support programs for parents are needed. Initiatives such as conditional cash transfers (linked to children's schooling) or the granting of microcredits for the development of income-generating activities for mothers have proven their effectiveness in other contexts²⁴.

4.3. The role of the community and civil society

The State cannot act alone. Civil society, local and international NGOs, as well as communities themselves have a crucial role to play.

1. Raising awareness and changing mindsets

It is imperative to carry out awareness campaigns to deconstruct the trivialization of child labour. Parents, community leaders and clients need to be informed about the disastrous consequences of this practice on children's health and futures. Changing social norms is a prerequisite for eradicating the phenomenon.

2. School reintegration and psychosocial support

NGOs must intensify their school reintegration programmes for out-of-school children. This involves not only paying school fees, but also setting up remedial classes and psychosocial support to help these children overcome street-related trauma and readjust to the school environment.

3. Improving access to education

Beyond school reintegration, it is necessary to make education more accessible and adapted to the realities of poor children. This involves the effective abolition of all school fees, the provision of free school

²⁴ Plan International. (2026).

supplies and school meals, and the improvement of the pedagogical quality of schools. Satellite schools or flexible education programmes could be set up to accommodate children who have missed several years of school.

4. Strengthening Law Enforcement

The DRC has legal frameworks prohibiting child labour, including ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. However, these laws remain largely unenforced. Capacity-building for labour inspectors and local authorities is needed to ensure compliance with these legal provisions and to punish employers who exploit children.

4.4. Challenges and barriers to implementation

Although the proposed solutions are theoretically coherent, their implementation faces major challenges. The lack of financial resources is the first obstacle. The DRC, despite its natural wealth, remains a low-income country with a limited public budget. Improving access to drinking water would require massive investments, estimated at several hundred million dollars, which the government cannot finance alone. In addition, weak governance and endemic corruption in the Congolese administration often undermine the effectiveness of interventions. Funds for infrastructure improvements are frequently diverted, and development projects are bogged down in bureaucracy.

There is also a tension between short-term goals (generating income to survive) and long-term goals (investing in education for a better future). For families in extreme poverty, this tension is often resolved in favour of the short term, as the future seems too distant and uncertain.

4.5. Towards a systemic approach to development

To overcome these barriers, a systemic and multisectoral approach is required. The Congolese government, in partnership with the international community, must design an integrated urban development strategy that simultaneously addresses the water crisis, poverty, unemployment and access to education.

This strategy must be anchored in a long-term vision, with measurable intermediate steps. It must involve all actors: the State, local authorities, the private sector, NGOs and the communities themselves. The involvement of children and parents in the design and implementation of solutions is crucial to ensure their relevance and acceptability.

Additional Reflections and Sociological Implications the Question of Collective Responsibility

The sociological analysis of the labour of child water vendors in Kisangani invites us to reflect on the question of collective responsibility. Traditionally, child labour has been presented as an individual or

family problem, blamed on the parents' poverty or lack of awareness. However, a broader sociological perspective shows that this

This phenomenon is the product of social, economic and political structures that go far beyond individual choices.

The State, as the institution responsible for the provision of basic services and the protection of its citizens, bears an important share of responsibility for the perpetuation of child labour. By failing to provide clean water to its population, by failing to create decent jobs for adults, and by failing to guarantee access to quality education, the state is creating the conditions that make child labour inevitable.

Similarly, the international community, which has set standards for child protection and finances development in Africa, shares responsibility for the monitoring and application of these standards. Donors must ensure that their investments actually contribute to improving living conditions and protecting children, not just to the enrichment of a corrupt elite.

The intergenerational reproduction of poverty

Child labour selling water in Kisangani is a key mechanism for the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. By depriving children of education and exposing them to degrading working conditions, society locks them into a trajectory of poverty from which it will be very difficult for them to extricate themselves. This child who sells water today at the age of 10, who drops out of school and who accumulates trauma related to the street, will tomorrow be an adult without qualifications, without social capital and without resources. He will have few options other than to stay in the informal sector, replicate the same survival strategies as his parents, and send his children to work in turn.

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction takes on its full relevance here. The capital (economic, cultural, social) that children are unable to accumulate because of their early work cannot be passed on to the next generation. Thus, the cycle of poverty is perpetuated, generating structural inequality that persists through the decades.

Implications for public policy

The sociological analyses presented in this article have clear implications for public policy. They suggest that purely repressive or charitable approaches will not be enough to eradicate child labour. It is necessary to intervene on the structural causes: access to drinking water, adult employment, quality education.

These interventions must be conceived not as one-off aid measures, but as investments in the nation's human and social capital. Educating children today is an investment in tomorrow's economic productivity and social stability. Child protection is not an expense; it is an investment.

5. Presentation and analysis of results

This section presents empirical data collected during our field survey in Kisangani, conducted with a sample of 120 child water sellers, 50 parents and 15 institutional and community actors. The results are structured around socio-demographic characteristics, working conditions and economic motivations.

5.1. Presentation of the results

5.1.1. Socio-demographic profile of children who sell water

The data collected reveal that the phenomenon affects a very young population. Of the 120 children surveyed, 68% are between 10 and 14 years old, while 22% are under 10 years old. Only 10% are between the ages of 15 and 17. Regarding gender, there is a predominance of men: 65% of water vendors are boys, compared to 35% girls. This disparity is partly explained by the physical arduousness of the task (carrying heavy loads), often considered by parents to be more suitable for boys, although girls are also heavily involved, often in selling by the cup rather than the can.

The educational status of these children is of particular concern. Almost half (48%) are completely out of school. Of those still in school (52%), the vast majority (85%) are at least two years behind their normal age group.

5.1.2. Working conditions and income

The working conditions reported by the children show intense exploitation. The average daily working time is 8.5 hours for out-of-school children and 4.5 hours for those who go to school. The days often start very early, with 42% of children saying they start their activity before 6 a.m. to get water from water points before the peak crowds.

The loads carried are disproportionate to the morphology of the children. On average, a child carries between 15 and 25 litres of water per trip, making between 5 and 10 trips per day depending on the distance between the point of supply and the sales area.

Financially, the average daily income generated by a child varies between 1,500 and 3,000 Congolese francs (about US\$0.75 to US\$1.50). Significantly, 92% of the children surveyed say they do not keep any part of this money for themselves; The entire proceeds are given to the parents or guardian at the end of the day.

5.1.3. Parents' motivations and perceptions

The interviews conducted with the 50 parents confirm the predominance of the economic factor. To the question Why does your child sell water? 88% of parents cite insufficient household income to cover daily food needs. Only 12% mention the financing of the child's schooling as the main motivation.

It is interesting to note that 74% of the parents surveyed are aware that this work is harmful to their child's health or education. However, they justify this practice by the lack of alternatives. The expression "We have no choice, it's to survive" came up repeatedly during the interviews.

5.2. Analysis of the results

5.2.1. The Invisible Feminization and the Sexual Division of Child Labor

The analysis of the data reveals a sexual division of child labour in the water sector. While boys are more numerous and visible in the transport of large volumes (20-litre cans on rickshaws or on their heads), girls are often relegated to retail sales (cups or small sachets of water) in markets or at crossroads. This distribution reproduces the gender stereotypes of adult society. In addition, girls are exposed specific risks, including sexual harassment by clients or passers-by, a risk that is often minimized or silenced by parents during interviews.

5.2.2. The paradox of partial schooling

The fact that 52% of children who sell water are still in school might seem, at first glance, to be a positive indicator. However, the in-depth analysis shows that this is a façade of schooling. The combination of exhausting work and studies inevitably leads to massive school delays (85% of cases) and chronic absenteeism. The child is physically present at school, but cognitively unavailable due to fatigue and lack of time to study. This situation illustrates a slow but certain transition towards total unschooling, with work gradually taking precedence over school as the child grows and his or her carrying capacity increases.

5.2.3. The economic alienation of the child

The fact that 92% of children give all of their earnings to their parents demonstrates total economic alienation. The child is not an autonomous economic actor, but a simple instrument of production at the service of family survival. This dynamic is perfectly in line with Paugam's theory of social disqualification²⁵: the family, excluded from the formal labour market, compensates for its marginalisation

25 Paugam, S. (1991).

by exploiting the only resource it has, namely the labour power of its offspring. The child becomes the safety net of a failed state.

6. Discussion of Results and Recommendations

6.1. Discussion of the results

6.1.1. Validation of research hypotheses

The results of our field investigation largely validate our initial hypotheses.

Our main hypothesis was that the sale of water by children is the result of the intersection between extreme poverty and the failure of public services. The data confirms this: 88% of parents justify this work by food survival, in an urban context where drinking water has become a scarce commodity due to REGIDESO's inability to serve the population.

Our first secondary hypothesis, concerning the harmful consequences on schooling and health, is corroborated by the high rate of school dropout (48%) and school delay (85%), as well as by the exhausting working hours (up to 8.5 hours per day) and the heavy loads carried by growing children.

Finally, our second secondary hypothesis, based on the theories of Bourdieu and Paugam, is also verified. The lack of economic and social capital locks these families into short-term survival strategies. By sacrificing their children's education for a paltry immediate income (less than US\$1.50 a day), these families are unwittingly reproducing their own condition of poverty for the next generation.

6.1.2. The normalization of abnormality: structural violence

The discussion of these results highlights a profound sociological phenomenon: the normalization of abnormality. In Kisangani, the presence of 8 or 10-year-old children carrying heavy loads of water in the streets has become a commonplace scene in everyday life. This trivialization masks an unprecedented structural violence.

As Bourdieu points out, symbolic violence is exercised with the complicity of those who suffer it²⁶. Here, the parents, although aware of the harmful effects of this work (74%), accept it as inevitable. Urban society, itself a victim of water scarcity, consumes the services of these children without questioning the system that exploits them. The State, by its inaction, tolerates this flagrant violation of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child²⁷.

²⁶ Bourdieu, P. (1986).

²⁷ UNICEF. (1989).

6.1.3. The limits of the purely repressive approach

Our results show that child labour is not a deliberate choice of unworthy parents, but a constraint imposed by poverty. Therefore, a purely repressive approach (prohibiting the sale of water by children, punishing parents) would not only be ineffective, but also cruel. It would deprive these families of their only source of survival without offering them an alternative, potentially pushing them towards even more dangerous activities (theft, prostitution). The solution must be systemic and address the root causes.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on our analysis and discussion of the results, we make the following recommendations, addressed to the various actors involved:

6.2.1. To the attention of the Government of the DRC and the provincial authorities of Tshopo

- Declare a state of infrastructure emergency for water in Kisangani: It is imperative to mobilize emergency funds to rehabilitate and expand the REGIDESO network. The construction of free or subsidized public standpipes in outlying neighborhoods (such as Mangobo) would drastically reduce the demand for informally sold water, thus drying up the market that exploits children.
- Establish social safety nets: Create a conditional cash transfer (TMC) program targeting extremely poor families in Kisangani. These financial allowances would be paid to mothers, on the strict condition that their children are enrolled and attend school, thus compensating for the loss of income linked to the child's cessation of work.
- Make primary education truly free and inclusive: Remove all ancillary costs (motivation fees, uniforms) that hinder access to school. Set up free school canteens to encourage parents to send their children to school rather than to work for food reasons.

6.2.2. To Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society

- Develop accelerated school reintegration programmes: For the 48% of children who have dropped out of school, direct integration into the traditional system is often doomed to failure. We need to create remedial education centres adapted to their age and experience, accompanied by psychosocial support to deal with street-related trauma.
- Support the economic empowerment of parents: Set up microcredit and vocational training programs specifically for parents (especially mothers) of children who sell water, to enable them to develop dignified and sustainable income-generating activities.
- Conduct behaviour change campaigns: Organize community awareness campaigns to deconstruct the trivialization of child labour and inform about the health and developmental risks associated with carrying heavy loads.

6.2.3. To the attention of the international community and donors

- Condition development assistance: Require that funding for urban infrastructure projects in the DRC systematically include strict clauses and measurable indicators regarding the reduction of child labour in the areas of intervention.
- Fund research and data collection: Support local universities (such as the University of Kisangani) to conduct longitudinal studies on child labour, to ensure that reliable and up-to-date data are available to guide public policy.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This scientific reflection has analysed in depth the phenomenon of water sales by children in the urban areas of Kisangani, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We have demonstrated that this phenomenon is not an isolated anomaly, but the symptom of a deep urban crisis, characterized by the intersection of extreme poverty, the failure of public infrastructure and the absence of social protection.

The causes of child labour in water vendors are multiple and interconnected. Household poverty, difficult access to education, the social trivialization of child labour and the lack of social capital of marginalised families are all factors that make child labour unavoidable for children in Kisangani.

The daily realities of these children are marked by physical hardship, exposure to disease, violence and exploitation. These conditions seriously compromise their physical, psychological and educational development, with lasting consequences on their life trajectory.

Future prospects and recommendations

To eradicate this scourge, we recommend:

- In the short term: Intensify support programs for children currently involved in the sale of water, in particular through school reintegration, psychosocial support and economic assistance to families.
- Medium-term: Implement structural reforms to improve access to safe drinking water, create decent jobs for adults, and ensure access to quality education for all children.
- Long-term: Build a vision of sustainable urban development for Kisangani, where population growth is accompanied by a proportional improvement in infrastructure and basic services.

Call to action

The results of this study constitute an urgent call to action for all actors involved in child development and protection in the DRC. The Congolese government must make child protection and access to drinking water top priorities in its development policy. The international community must increase its financial and

technical support for these efforts. NGOs and civil society organizations need to scale up their advocacy and response programs. And the communities themselves must mobilize to demand respect for the rights of their children.

Time is running out. With each passing day, dozens of children in Kisangani sacrifice their childhood and future to sell water. This injustice cannot be tolerated in a society that claims to be civilized. Child protection is a test of our collective humanity.

CONCLUSION

The sale of water by children in urban Kisangani is a complex phenomenon that lies at the intersection of extreme poverty, poor public infrastructure and social tolerance. The abundance of water resources in the DRC is in stark contrast to the daily reality of these children, who are turned into beasts of burden to compensate for the state's inability to provide an essential basic service.

Our analysis, informed by Bourdieu's theories of social capital and Paugam's theories of social exclusion, demonstrates that this early work is not a simple anomaly, but a systemic mechanism for the reproduction of inequalities. By depriving children of their right to education, health and play, society locks them into a cycle of disqualifying poverty from which it will be extremely difficult for them to escape.

The daily realities of these child water sellers are marked by physical hardship, exposure to disease, violence and exploitation. Their presence in the streets of Kisangani is the visible symptom of a deep urban crisis.

To eradicate this scourge, it is urgent to go beyond the facts and adopt courageous and integrated public policies. The rehabilitation of the drinking water distribution network is a *sine qua non*, but it must be accompanied by strong measures to combat household poverty and support schooling. The protection of children must no longer be an empty word, but a national priority, because it is in respect for the rights of its children that the true development of a nation is measured.

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